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SUBJECT: SHAHRISTANI COMMENTS ON NAJAF

CLASSIFIED BY POLCOUNS ROBERT FORD FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In his call on Ambassador Negroponte, Dr. Hussain al-Shahristani was critical of the Iraqi Interim Government's (IIG) handling of the situation in Najaf, believing that it has made Muqtada al-Sadr stronger and has cost the Government much support. He urged against a military solution in Najaf, stressing that the grievances of supporters of the Mehdi army need to be addressed. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Dr. Hussain al-Shahristani, a nuclear scientist, President of the Iraqi National Academy of Science and prominent leader of Iraq's Shias, called on Ambassador Negroponte on August 14.

¶3. (C) After initial introductions and pleasantries, the discussion turned to the situation in Najaf. Dr. Shahristani said that he had been in Najaf previously, on a day of very heavy fighting. He had wanted to see Muqtada al-Sadr in order to mediate. Unfortunately, the fighting was too severe to enable Shahristani to go behind the military lines to meet with al-Sadr.

¶4. (C) The major problem at this time, said Shahristani, is that al-Sadr has gained strength and he and his Jaysh Mehdi are being seen sympathetically by increasing numbers of Iraqis -- in large part because of clumsy handling of the situation by the IIG and Coalition forces. He is seen as an underdog and has received considerably more popular attention than he deserves. Shahristani believes that there can be no military solution to the al-Sadr problem and the way it has been handled thus far is not in the best interests of the country. Moreover, poor handling of al-Sadr in the media -- statements insulting him, particularly by the Prime Minister and others -- has only aggravated the problem. It should be understood, said Shahristani, that the great majority of al-Sadr's supporters are very poor, deprived people, mostly Shia, who have gained nothing since Saddam's fall. He also said that many of al-Sadr's supporters bear deep resentment for generations of poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Their living conditions remain terrible. (In some areas of Sadr City, he noted, children have to walk through sewage to get to school.) Their anger now has resulted from a sense that they are still excluded, even from the political process, and al-Sadr has taken advantage of that. But al-Sadr and his supporters have also been able to gain sympathy among many Sunnis.

¶5. (C) Ambassador pointed out that some of the sense that nothing has changed is due to the lack of visibility of some of the improvements. Few people can see or appreciate what has been done to provide for the flow of oil and the generation of more electricity, for example. Shahristani acknowledged that, but said that much more that is visible could be done. An example of a program that had both visibility and tangible gains was a privately-funded "Work-for-Food" project in Karbala that, he said, was highly successful. It had a budget of USD 10,000, there was a program which employed about 450 men cleaning streets and individuals were paid with food

baskets.

¶16. (C) There was a time last year, Shahrستاني said, when he believes al-Sadr was willing to join in the political process, but he was pushed aside Q- particularly by educated Iraqis who had spent years in exile. At times, al-Sadr has been receptive to joining in the political process; at this time he is not Q- and this would not be a good time to speak to him as he sees political gain in confrontation.

¶17. (C) Shahrستاني does not believe that al-Sadr wants an Islamic state. What he believes al-Sadr wants is respectability and, indeed, a share of power. Al-Sadr has been able to successfully tap the long-standing desire on the part of many Shia for recognition and has gained the support of large numbers of people who have been marginalized and poor for generations -- descendants of laborers who had been the feudal poor and feel they have nothing to lose.

¶18. (C) Ambassador commented that it would be strange to suggest that Sadr has a right to hold the city of Najaf. The Government's response to try to assert control over Najaf looks reasonable. Shahrستاني agreed, saying that the Mehdi Army should disarm and retire from the city. He believes, however, that it is important to distinguish between the Mehdi insurgents and those, particularly in the Sunni triangle, who continue to hope for a resurrection of the Saddam regime. What he considers the poor handling of al-Sadr and the Mehdi Army, particularly by a number of those in the IIG, has only intensified the situation and created more tensions. The fighting in Najaf, he believes, was avoidable. It has cost the Government much-needed support and led al-Sadr to take less rational positions. Shahrستاني asked the Ambassador to use his influence to caution the IIG, believing that the U.S. has an important role to play, as does the United Nations.

¶19. (C) Shahrستاني does not consider Muqtada al-Sadr either helpful or admirable. Neither does he see him as a serious religious leader. However, he believes that the way to deal with al-Sadr is for him to be drawn into the political process rather than be forced into a confrontation. More importantly, the poor, downtrodden, mostly Shia supporters of al-Sadr need to be given reason to feel that their circumstances are improving and that they have a stake in the new Government.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Shahrستاني spoke quietly but earnestly about the grim situation confronting the Shia urban poor. He is a man of considerable integrity and is both dedicated to democratic values and the betterment of Iraq overall. As a leader of the Shia community and close to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, his views can also be said to be the voice of Shia moderation. That said, already by the evening of August 12, Iraqi Government National Security Advisor Rubaie was in Najaf trying to negotiate with Sadr. Had Shahrستاني actually reached Sadr, a confused negotiating situation might have grown even more confused.

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